Using the Nine Reading Comprehension Strategies of The Vermont Strategic Reading Initiative

Vermont's Strategies

This section provides an in-depth look at each of Vermont's Nine Strategies for Reading Comprehension. Vermont educators spent several years developing this list of Strategies, working from existing lists, from research about reading comprehension, and from field work conducted throughout the state.

If you're familiar with work done on this topic by other educators, much of what follows will be familiar – Vermont's approach has much in common with other approaches, such as those outlined in Harvey and Goudvis' **Strategies that Work**, (2000), Schoenbach, et al's **Reading for Understanding** (2000) and Meltzer, et al's **Adolescent Literacy Resources** (2001).

Vermont's approach does differ from some others, however, in several ways.
First, the term "strategy" itself. We have chosen to use this as the overarching umbrella describing the mental processes readers use to comprehend. We use "tool" for activities that help students learn these strategies—KWL, QAR, graphic organizers, etc. We make this distinction because our goal is to help students engage in nine strategic mental processes, and the tools/activities are merely vehicles to support this. Readers shouldn't spend their entire reading lives using QAR. They should "Ask Questions," or "Determine Important Ideas & Themes." They should become strategic readers.

Second, several of the strategies differ from those listed in other sources. For example, we have broadened what is often referred to as "visualizing" to include a wider range of sensory experience, from imagining the sounds one might hear in a scene to drawing a diagram of a molecule – we call the strategy "Imagine." At the recommendation of a number of reading specialists, we have also included the strategy "Recognize Words and Understand Sentences." This strategy is included as a reminder of the importance of phonics and fluency in comprehension, recognizing that even some high school students still have difficulty in these areas. **Finally, we have pulled strands from several strategies into "Analyze Text Structure."** We did this because a careful reading of the literature about reading comprehension combined with observations in the field made it clear that this strategy is **essential** for effective comprehension.

Metacognition

Like most other strategy advocates, we highlight the role metacognition plays in supporting strategy acquisition and comprehension. This emphasis has existed from the earliest days of this project – the 1998 precursor to the VSRI was named the "Reflective Reading Project." The Nine Strategies document developed in 2001 reads, in part:

Strategic reading requires that readers operate metacognitively, to think about their own thinking. They do this by asking themselves, "Am I getting it?" Metacognition enables readers to monitor their comprehension so they can determine when and why text is unclear, then choose the strategy or strategies that will help them construct meaning. These strategies can be used before, during or after reading. Discussion and writing also support the construction of meaning, and supplement the benefits of strategic reading.

Strategies and Tools

Readers interested simply in a general overview of each strategy and tools to enhance it can read "Strategy-at-a-Glance," a feature that precedes the detailed discussion of each strategy.

Readers interested in the finer points will find that each strategy is examined in some detail. First comes a general discussion of how the strategy supports reading comprehension. This is followed by information about how the strategy can be imparted to students, with specific recommendations from Vermont teachers.

Several points cannot be reiterated often enough:

1. We artificially delineate reading strategies, but good readers actually jump from one to another without even noticing – the strategies are all highly interconnected;

2. Reading comprehension is not improved simply by teaching students to use a few tools now and then – it takes time, practice, and lots of reflection on the reading process to make a difference;

3. No tool in and of itself creates stronger readers – these are merely stepping stones toward authentic strategy use.

Some Tools for All Seasons

Several popular tools are applicable to several, if not all, strategies. Perhaps as a result of this broad applicability, they virtually mandate metacognition.

THINK-ALOUDS

The Think-Aloud (Davey, 1983) is an all-purpose tool that can be used to support every reading strategy. Basically, the Think-Aloud asks the teacher to make visible what's going on in his or her mind as he or she reads.
  As such, the tool can be used to focus on a specific strategy – for example, revealing only parts of the reading that elicit connections with prior knowledge – or revealing the full breadth of responses the reader has – the questions he or she asks, the inferences that arise, the images visualized, etc.

The teacher-modeled Think-Aloud shows students the extent to which good readers interact with text.
  Some teachers prefer to prepare exactly what they'll say before they begin reading. Others prefer to let their thoughts unfold more naturally, even when they're familiar with the text. The Think-Aloud, a highly metacognitive process, makes some people feel a bit uncomfortable since it entails exposing the reader's personal thought-process to an audience. But after several demonstrations this initial embarrassment vanishes.

While the teacher reads the passage aloud, students follow along in the text.
The teacher simply says out loud the thoughts that occur as he or she reads:

- "Oh, this makes me think of the other book we read about wolves";

- "I wonder why the author has interjected so much description in the middle of the story";

- "It looks like this article supports the decision to go to war."

Once the teacher has modeled the activity enough for the students to see what's going on, students themselves can be asked to do their own thinking aloud.
They can do this on their own, jotting notes and discussing what they wrote, or they can think aloud in pairs, taking turns.

Think-Alouds mainly show – or remind – students how complex good readers' interactions with text can be. They can be used when a new strategy is introduced. Periodically returning to the technique helps students see what they're doing as they read, including reflecting on how their interactions with text have evolved.

CODING TEXT…OR THE CLOSE READ

These are just fancy names for teaching students to do what most good readers auto-matically do with books they own – **underlining and annotating the text itself.** Like the Think-Aloud, coding can be used to demonstrate any and all strategies, or to focus on a specific strategy, such as "Ask Questions," or "Explore Inferences." In a sense, this serves the same function as the Think-Aloud in that modeling the activity enables students to see one way a strategic reader interacts with text.

Students are usually discouraged from marking up books owned by the school system. They can, however, be expected to underline and annotate workbooks, photocopies, etc. They can also be expected to use post-its for some textbook assignments, such as noting in the appropriate place all the questions they have about the text, or the con-nections they are making with prior knowledge.

Most important, students should be provided with opportunities to reflect on the impact that annotating and underlining have on their own understanding and retention: The simple act of having a writing implement at the ready as one reads can focus the attention. Then the acts of noting something important, decid-ing to code it, determining what to write or how much to underline, then scanning one's eyes over the information as one writes or underlines turn the simple act of reading into an invaluable contemplate-and-review exercise.

This activity should not be conducted in a vacuum. When students have coded text, they can compare what they've done with peers, and discuss how they decided to take note of what they did (Metacognition!). Use an overhead or pro-vide a photocopy of your own annotations, and compare what they did with what you did. Be careful, however, not to imply that there's only one right way to do this.

Several notes of caution. Students need careful guidance with this tool or they'll just underline everything on the page.

- Have them use a pen or pencil instead of a marker so they can easily write words as well as note important information;

- In the beginning give them specific tasks, such as putting a star by the important points, and exclamation marks by anything that surprises them, and a question mark by anything they don't understand;

- Limit the amount of underlining they can do to no more than one-third of a paragraph.

Know – Want to Learn – Learned

KWL (Ogle, 1986, 1989) is widely used on a variety of grade levels and subject areas. It works just as well before reading fourth-graders a picture book about frogs as it does before embarking on the study of quadratic equations in advanced math classes.

The strategy calls for students to determine what they already know about a subject, what they'd like to know, and, once they've come to the end of the lesson, what they learned. The VSRI, working as it does with students beyond grade three, recommends renaming the strategy. We call it KEL for Know, Expect to Learn, Learned. This eliminates the possibility of a wag's responding, "What do I **want** to learn? Nothing!"

The tool calls upon students to use a variety of strategies.
> Listing what they know requires that they **Make Connections** with prior knowledge. Determining what they expect to learn can require that they Infer as they make predictions, that they **Ask Questions**, and that they **Determine Important Ideas and Themes**, to name a few. The tool is introduced at the beginning of a unit or before reading.

What to do:

- Ask students to turn a sheet of paper sideways, divide it into three columns, write K at the top of the left-hand column, E over the middle section, and L over the right-hand column.

- Think: They should write everything they already know about the subject to be studied.

- Pair-Share: They can then compare their findings with a partner, or immediately share their findings with the entire class. The collected knowledge should be written on a chart large enough for all students to see. [Note: Leaving "incorrect" information on the chart is advisable; this allows students to correct misinformation as they study the material.]

- Next, students complete the "Expect to Learn" column. This should be done first individually, then sharing it with the full group and combining

the results on a chart visible to all. Again, leaving things you know won't be discovered rather than explaining that they aren't in the unit allows students to make discoveries on their own. Also, having the students think about the material before beginning the study helps to involve them in what's to come. But to extract the full potential from this tool, the next steps, which call for the students to reflect on their knowledge and on themselves as learners, are crucial.

- As you study the material, have students complete the L column. They should then compare what they put – as individuals and as a class – in the K and E columns. Were they right about what they thought they knew? About what they thought they'd learn? This helps them become clear about what they're learning, and also to reflect on their previous assumptions.

- Comparing L's with K's and E's can be the concluding activity of the unit. If appropriate, however, new charts can be built, in which L's become K's. Reviewing their new knowledge, students ask themselves again what they can expect to learn.

Graphic Organizers

Graphic organizers can be used to support most strategies, and accomplish a simple purpose. **They visually organize information in such a way that its relationship with other information becomes clear.**

Venn Diagrams, for example, show what different elements have in common, and what differs among them. Story mapping (Routmann, 1991) allows the reader to visually represent the major narrative elements in a work of fiction.

There is no limit to the possible graphic organizers that teachers or students can develop and access. The web-based tool, Inspiration, is excellent, and another source that may be useful is **www.region15.org**, then select Teaching and Learning | Curriculum, and on that page choose teaching tools.

Making – and Using – Your Own Tools

Each teacher will prefer certain tools, depending on subject area, grade level, student demographics and teaching style; most teachers will modify the tools to suit their needs. The tools offered in this Handbook should be only the beginning, and many teachers will want to develop their own tools. In the next few pages are some guidelines for the development of such resources.

"Lesson Planning for Reading Strategies" provides a step-by-step method for deciding what strategy to focus on, how to address it, and how to bring the product of this work to bear on classroom instruction.

The "Comprehension-Enhancing Activity Template" provides a graphic organizer for creating a tool to enhance a specific strategy.

Notes

Lesson Planning for Reading Strategies

1. Choose a piece of text you will read as a part of regular class work

- Pre-read the text: What does this piece of text require of the reader? (What are some major understandings that you'd expect students to gain? What are some anticipated problems they might have?)

- Notice what reading strategies you use to read it.

- Choose one strategy that is predominantly needed at this time, in this text, by this class. (Look through the eyes of your struggling readers.)

- What one thing can you teach them today that they will be able to use tonight?

2. Plan your strategy teaching

- How can you model this one strategy with this text? (It's okay to mention others on the run if they have been previously introduced.)

- How much text will you model? Count on spending only about 10 minutes on modeling and discussing this.

- Ask the students what they noticed about you as a reader? Fill in anything you hoped they would notice but didn't.

- Remind your students to use this strategy while they read the assignment.

3. Plan for students to practice this strategy in their reading

- How will you have them all show their thinking while reading? (Post-its, 2 column notes, 3 column notes, KEL, Fact/Question/Response, character journal, response calendar, etc.?)

4. Have students share their thinking

- How will students share their process of reading (strategies) and the product (knowledge) gained from their reading? (Partners, small groups, whole class?)

- How will you prompt them? What will your question(s) be?

Alternate Approach to Lesson Planning

- Choose a reading strategy that your students need.

- Choose a piece of text that requires that strategy of the reader.

- Continue planning from step 2.

Comprehension-Enhancing Activity Template

Strategy I hope to help my students strengthen:

Level intended for:_____

Activity I will have the students do, in detail:

Type of activity: Check one

____Before Reading   ___During Reading   ____After Reading

Text Type: Check one

___ Any fiction   ___ Science   ___ Poetry   ___ Any text

___ Any non-fiction   ___ Social Studies   ___ Math   ___ Other

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Title of text to which activity will be applied (Optional):

Detailed instructions to students:

The VSRI Strategies

Imagine, Using a Variety of Senses

This strategy includes visualizing a scene depicted in the writing, creating a graphic or three-dimensional representation of an abstract principle, imagining how a substance might feel, smell, or taste, etc.

Make Connections

This strategy includes drawing upon prior knowledge to make text-to-self, text-to-text and text-to-world connections in order to clarify and extend understanding of the text.

Analyze Text Structure

This strategy includes using transition words, table of contents, subheads, bold print, and text patterns to help discriminate among fiction, nonfiction, comparative, explanatory and other text structures, as well as paying attention to other technical aspects of the author's craft.

Recognize Words and Understand Sentences

The decoding of words and the comprehension of sentences provide the underpinning for successful reading. Strategic readers use: knowledge of sounds, syllables and letter patterns; a range of cueing systems; familiarity with vocabulary and word origins; contextual cues; knowledge of syntax; etc.

Explore Inferences

This strategy involves various means of thinking about the text, including recognizing cause-and-effect relationships, making predictions, developing analogies, extending the logic of a piece of writing, and merging known and new information to develop new understanding.

Ask Questions

The reader creates questions about the text, such as "What is the author trying to say?" "How does this relate to my life?" or "Why did the author write in the way he or she did?" The reader also engages, throughout the reading, in posing metacognitive questions: "Am I getting the point?" "Why does this text (not) engage me?"

Determine Important Ideas and Themes

Strategic readers focus on introductory material, topic sentences, and/or concluding material in order to identify important parts of text and to distinguish among subplots, examples, big ideas, and underlying themes.

Evaluate, Summarize, Synthesize

Strategic readers pause during or after reading to consider the main points, construct new ideas from two or more pieces of text, and reflect on the quality and relevance of the text.

Reread and Adjust Approaches to the Text

In response to the differing demands of text, strategic readers modify the pace and rhythm with which they read, and take notes to clarify their understanding. As necessary, they also re-read, read aloud, and/or underline the text, etc.